



A *phoenix* *rising*

Grasses such as *Miscanthus* and *Cortaderia selloana* (pampas grass), and shrubs including *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' create a warm palette of russet, gold and white beneath a canopy of mature trees

Generous planting with richly-layered colour and lashings of vibrant foliage emerge from summer's ashes to glorious effect at St Timothee in Berkshire, says Naomi Slade
Photography: Clive Nichols



Near the house, the airy stems and seedheads of *Stipa gigantea* AGM are set off by the stronger plummy colours of *Cotinus* and *Hylotelephium*

Autumn's arrival can often feel like the beginning of the end for the gardening season. As the days shorten, the air holds a new chill; forewarning of winter on the horizon and carrying a whisper of regret, for foliage that's no longer fresh and the bright flowers that went before. But, as the sun sinks towards the horizon, and brisk breezes send leaves spiralling into the sky, St Timothee garden in Berkshire takes summer's passing in its stride.

Glowing with energy, and full to bursting with plants that peak and decline in slow motion, the botanical chameleons assume a new seasonal livery of red and gold and the late bloomers reveal themselves afresh. However, when Sarah and Sal Pajwani moved in with their young family in 2006, the prospect was very different.

"It was just a scruffy field with a few trees and some clumps of pampas grass," says Sarah. "The first winter was utterly dreary; it was soggy and horrible and there was nothing to look at. I'd dabbled in gardening before, but it quickly became quite clear to us that dabbling was never going to be enough here!"

“I carefully chose perennials that die well and therefore contribute for longer”



A sinuous grass path dotted with the fallen golden leaves of a tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera* AGM) winds through the garden, with *Cornus* and *Cotoneaster* giving further splashes of colour

Sarah's rural Cornish upbringing saw her days spent at sea with her fisherman father, or walking the cliffs and woodlands with her grandpa, so the natural world became her first love and influenced her gardening style. When, in 2008, she called in garden designers Acres Wild to help her make sense of the space, her brief was that the garden should be simple, natural and understated. "It's a large plot, but I wanted to be able to come out here and melt into the landscape. To enjoy nature and wildlife, rather than thinking 'Oh there's so much to do!'" she says. "When I started gardening, it was a way to communicate with nature, and still fit it around my job and children. You can come out for 10 minutes and do a bit of weeding, thinking, or pottering about. You can have that connection whenever you want it."

From the outset, Sarah wanted to do her own planting, so, armed with the designers' outline drawing that showed how the landscape and borders could work, she started planning. "With that first, grey season in mind, I thought about what would add that essential winter interest," she says. "Having a good autumn garden now is actually a by-product of focusing on winter."

The results are decidedly spectacular, with a mass of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' and gaily waving plumes of pampas grass set within a tapestry of other grasses and skeletal perennials. Backed by billowing trees including a mature *Quercus rubra* (red oak), *Liriodendron tulipifera* AGM and poplars in their autumn finery, dense tiers of planting form a palette of bronze, gold, chocolate and caramel. And here, in the space of one vista, Sarah inadvertently reveals the secret of a good late-season garden: namely to capitalise on both the tail end of summer and the structural strengths of winter, and overlay these with the »



Cornus sanguinea 'Midwinter Fire' makes a striking butter-yellow hedge paired beautifully with blue *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*

Meet the owner



Name: Sarah Pajwani.

Location: St Timothee, Darlings Lane, Pinkneys Green, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 6PA.

Size of garden: Just under two acres.

Age of garden: 18 years.

Maintenance: Sarah sees autumn as an

opportunity to pause. Mulching and pruning happens later, so it's a moment for planning ahead and some optimistic bulb planting. However, rather than leaving sagging perennials standing, or cutting them all down in one go, she prefers to edit gradually as the season progresses, removing what is no longer contributing to the overall picture. Each week and after every storm she tidies up broken stems and anything that looks tired, to try to keep a sense of order and love.

Visiting: For open days and group bookings, and to sign up for Sarah's autumn garden Talk and Walk event, on 2 November 2023, see: ngs.org.uk



A border packed with perovskia, *Stipa gigantea*, dahlias and blazing foliage frames a vista that leads to a row of sun-soaked poplars that draw the eye upwards to the heavens

highlights that belong to autumn alone. "I like lots of structure, so I layered up grasses, shrubs and trees, and carefully chose perennials that die well and therefore contribute for longer," she says.

"I love the way the sun becomes more golden at this time. Although it means shorter days, there are moments when it's utterly exquisite. I also feel that life's more relaxed – the pressure for this year is off and next year is a long way away. Wildlife has returned to the garden after a summer lull and bees and dragonflies are still active, so the best thing to do is sit with a coffee and drink it all in!"

Although Sarah has weekly assistance with the lawns and hedges, she likes to keep the borders to herself, gently titivating them through the year.

Sarah's 5 tips for autumn spectacle

- 1** Dialling up the reds brings energy and impact to borders. Try *Cotinus coggygia* 'Royal Purple' AGM, with plummy hues in summer that turn a fiery, deep red in late autumn.
- 2** Berries such as those on *Cotoneaster horizontalis* and *Crataegus* can add fresh colour as flowers fade.
- 3** Low autumn light highlights ornamental grasses, which add movement and softness.
- Try using bigger grasses, such as *Miscanthus*, *Calamagrostis* and *Stipa gigantea* AGM as if they were transparent shrubs.
- 4** Plant late-flowering salvias, *Symphotrichum* and *Dahlia* that last until the first frosts. *Kniphofia rooperi* AGM adds a splash of orange in October.
- 5** Repeat plants and colours to lend a sense of cohesion and continuity to the garden, as well as making life easier.



Above the pond, plumes of *Cortaderia selloana* rocket skywards to tangle with the glorious orange *Liriodendron*

The solid backbone of shrubs and perennials such as *Cotinus coggygia* 'Royal Purple' AGM, *Cornus alba* and *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* with their long and evolving season of interest, allows the plants to segue decoratively from month to month, while stacking plants into wide borders serves to frame enticing vistas across the garden.

"I wanted to create a place that was relaxed and welcoming, for family, friends and wildlife," says Sarah. "The challenge is to have something that looks lovely, yet accommodates all living things, but to be honest, the most destructive pest this year has been our new spaniel puppy Raffa!"

As the year wanes, juicy summer-berry colours gradually give way to the flaring orange flower spikes of *Kniphofia rooperi* AGM and intense reds of *Dahlia* 'Arabian Night', *Cotinus* Dusky Maiden ('Londus') and *Bistorta amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield' AGM, alongside the now butter-yellow foliage of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire'. Ahead of winter's robust arrival, the garden almost seems to hang in the balance. On a still day the glassy pond reflects incandescent leaves and a brilliant sky, while sunbeams creep under branches to illuminate something new or forgotten, briefly, before the light fades and quiet darkness returns.

And for Sarah, her garden is a focus, a canvas and an endless source of pleasure, whatever the time of year. "I enjoy it and that's the most important thing. I'm a great planner and planter, and if it works, I repeat it again and again." ○

Naomi Slade is an author and gardening expert. She has written nine books to date, including *RHS The Winter Garden*, published by DK